

FOOD

THREE MEALS IN EUROPE WITH MY MOTHER

written by Guest Contributor | July 11, 2018



A Full Irish Breakfast

On our first morning at the Charleville Lodge in Dublin, I awoke to the sound of maids in the corridor. They beat pillows with dull thunks and spoke musically in Gaelic. After an hour of unproductive yawning, I roused my mother and we went in to breakfast.

The Charleville's dining room was as quaint as the rest of the lodge, but behind its homey façade lurked gastronomic horrors the like of which we'd never imagined. On sitting down to our inaugural Full Irish Breakfast, my heart trembled. It was like a mountain climber's first terrible sight of Everest. A seemingly insurmountable plate loomed up before me, heaped with bacon, beans, eggs, toast and tomatoes. There were slices of something else, something mottled and meat-like, which we didn't recognize. Mother appealed to our waitress for identification.

"Pudding," she answered.

"Pudding? What's in it?" said Mother.

"Pig blood."

"Pig blood?"

"Sure."

She gave us some napkins and rushed off to another table. The Dublin Marathon was taking place that week and the room was full of hungry Dutchmen in spandex shorts.

We sampled the black pudding (a sausage filled with pork, suet, fat, bread, and, yes, pig's blood), but much preferred the white version, which featured oatmeal in place of the blood. Mother intelligently finished half her food and put the rest aside, watching in amazement as I cleared my plate with brainless abandon.

The result of this orgy of early morning grease and meat was that I promptly returned to our room and collapsed into a narcotic slumber. The sights of Dublin were going unseen, but I couldn't help it. A first-timer should never attempt to digest a Full Irish Breakfast in its entirety; it is something to be eased into over the course of a week or two, particularly for someone accustomed, as I am, to a bowl of Protestant Raisin Bran every morning.

Lunch at Piazza San Marco

Our first Venetian lunch was panini at a café on St. Mark's Square. In Italy, the panino is more than just a sandwich—it is an expression of the panino maker's personality and creative essence. If you receive a panino with burnt crust, uneven condiment distribution, and meat hanging haphazardly outside the bread, you know are dealing with an unfocused, possibly disturbed, panino maker.

Our man, uniformed in a crisp white shirt and matching cap, was a true artist. He sliced bread and meat with careful precision, and operated his griddler as expertly as a Japanese swordsmith at his forge. When I asked for the panini to go, he was crestfallen. Dropping his creations into a paper bag seemed to cause him physical pain, but I wasn't about to pay extra for a table in the café. Instead, Mother and I sat outside on one of the raised platforms that are used to bridge the piazza when it's flooded.

A squadron of pigeons circled above the square, flapping, diving, and shitting like Spitfires. Some people screamed and ran for cover, while others courted the beasts, placing potato chips on their shoulders to lure them in for photos. One woman was swarmed and pecked until her neck bled. What sort of horrific bacterial infection would she be bringing home? The birds suffered casualties, too. There were feathery corpses strewn across the cobblestones and decomposing on ledges.

"It's awful," said Mother. "I can't eat here."

"Of course you can. Everyone needs a good Venice pigeon story."

"I already have a good Venice story. It's about my son, who's too cheap to sit at a table like a normal person."

A chubby pigeon waddled over and stood at a polite distance, watching us eat. He was thoughtful, almost calculating, and bore an uncanny resemblance to the late actor Sydney Greenstreet.

"Give him something," I said. "Look how patient he is."

"Don't even think about it. They'll be all over us."

I told Mother she had to be subtle, and demonstrated by placing a small bit of bread behind my shoe, where only Sydney Greenstreet could see it. He collected his snack with practiced discretion, walking past it at first and then coming back around—oh, so casually—to snatch it up. Though there were Hitchcockian numbers of birds in the vicinity, not one caught on to his expert maneuver.

"He's good," I said. "No wonder he's so fat."

Sydney wanted more. "Go on," I said, nudging Mother. "He's a nice bird."

She gave in to his charm and dropped a piece of ham.

"N-o-o-o!" I cried. "Behind your foot, not beside your foot!" But it was too late. I knew it, and Sydney knew it. He looked at Mother with an expression of profound disappointment. "My God, woman," he seemed to say. "What have you done?"

A wall of spread wings descended, darkening the sky. Before they hit, I buried my head between my knees and tried to cover as many vital organs as possible. The subsequent flurry played out in hyper-time: Mother swatting pigeons away with a Fodor's guidebook, me leaping up and flailing the air with an insane array of crane kicks and karate chops. The attack was furious, but brief. When the pigeons realized there was no more food to be had, they quickly dispersed. Sydney had snuck off during the melee and was probably already plumping his feathers at the feet of more intelligent tourists.

"Wonderful lunch," said Mother, picking the remains of her panino off her pants.

Dinner in Roma

One evening in Rome, I took Mother out to a favorably reviewed seafood restaurant. The critic had recommended cuttlefish, and specified that the cuttlefish should be cooked in its own ink. When my order arrived, the steaming globs of cephalopod were indeed floating in a bowl of black liquid.

"Has this cuttlefish been cooked in its own ink?" I asked the waiter.

"Ink," he said, pointing at the bowl. "Si."

"Yes, but how do I know it didn't come from some other cuttlefish? Or a Bic pen?"

The waiter looked confused.

"Don't pay any attention to him," said Mother. "He's just trying to be funny."

Mother refused to eat anything cooked in ink—its own or otherwise—and got langostinos instead.

"They're delicious," she said. "Though I wish they would've taken their heads off. I don't like those beady eyes staring up at me."

The cuttlefish was tender, not rubbery, the ink-sauce smooth and rich.

After I depleted the wine, we were ready to go, but the waiter had yet to bring our bill. This is something you must get used to in Europe if you ever want to eat out. European waiters consider themselves very polite; they will never rush you. When you want your check, you must summon them. This can be a difficult concept for Americans who are accustomed to having a bill slapped down in front of them halfway through dessert. Though rude, this New World approach is actually a far easier way of concluding a meal than trying to get the attention of a European waiter.

I waved at ours, and he didn't come. I tried again, this time making the universal air scribble that signifies "check."

"He's not seeing you," said Mother. "Wait till he walks by."

"How am I supposed to know when he walks by? I'm facing the window. Why don't you flag him down?"

"Oh, no, Daniel. The woman never calls the waiter. That's the man's job."

"Nonsense. Women are liberated now. You can call waiters all night long if you want. Go ahead—it's fun."

She slowly shook her head. This was meant to communicate deep disappointment in my manners. "I'll tell you when he's coming this way. Then you can turn around and hail him."

On the waiter's first pass, I raised my hand at Mother's signal. He didn't see it. On the waiter's second pass, I said, "Scusi." He didn't hear it. On the waiter's third pass, I grabbed his sleeve and nearly knocked a platter of sea bream loose.

"Il conto, per favore," I said.

This set in motion a lengthy process that ended many hours later with an actual bill of sale. I looked it over and got out my credit card. When I turned to hand it to the waiter, he was gone.

"Oh, no," I said. "Where is he?"

"Over there," said Mother.

"Why'd you let him get away? The woman can't even tell the waiter to hold on a minute?"

"That's the man's job, Daniel."

I waived the check in the air, but it was no use.

"How long have we been in this restaurant?" I said.

"I've lost track of time."

So had I, but I was certain the sun had set at least twice.

"Scusi?" I said, sobbing. "Scusi, signore?"



Dan Morey is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania. He's worked as a book critic, nightlife columnist, travel correspondent and outdoor journalist. His writing has appeared in Hobart, Cleaver Magazine, McSweeney's Quarterly and others. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2017. Find him at danmorey.weebly.com.

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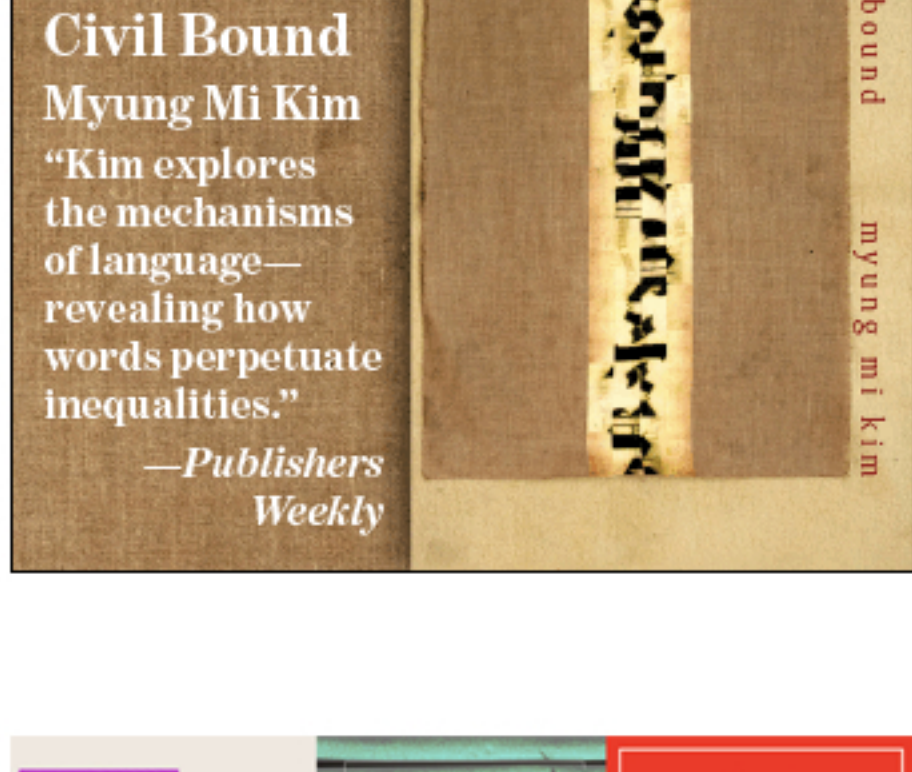
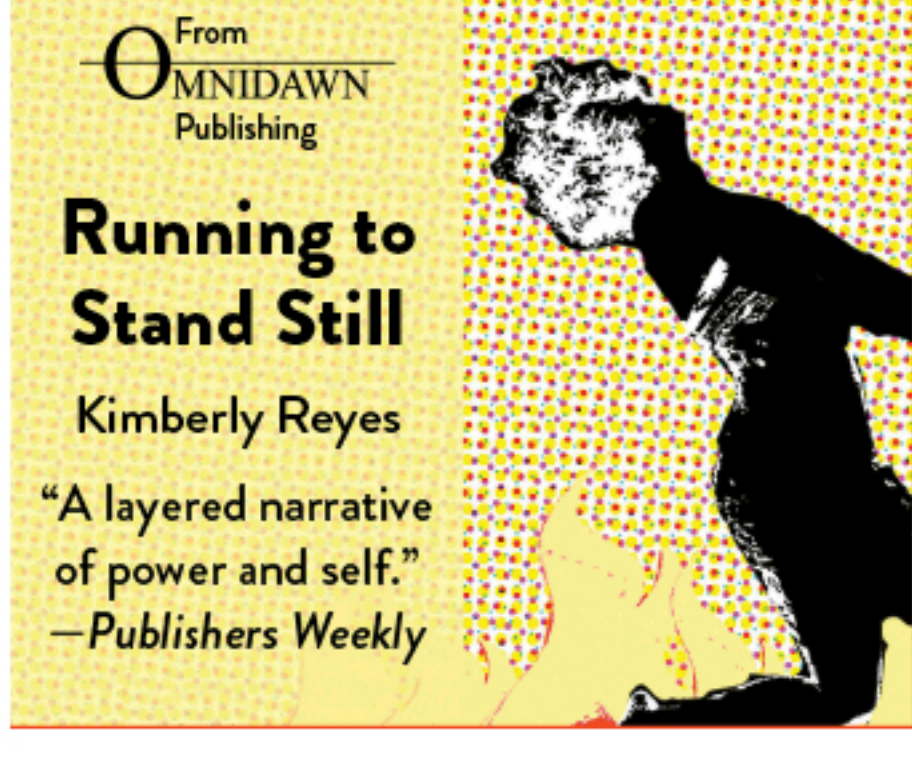
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